

President's Legacy

Mr. Bourar. Last question, Mr. President. How do you think people in the Middle East will remember you?

The President. I hope they remember me as the guy who was willing to fight extremists who murdered the innocent to achieve political objectives and, at the same time, had great faith in the people, the average citizen of the Middle East, to self-govern; that the Middle East has got a fantastic future, and that I admire the great traditions of the Middle East and believe that the average man can succeed mightily; that societies are best served when they respond to the will of people, and that we must reject the extremists who have a different view of that, the people who only prey on hopelessness. That's what I would hope.

I would hope that they would say, President Bush respects my religion and has great love for the human being and believes in human dignity. I know my image can be different at times. I had to make some tough choices on war and peace. On the other hand, I hope people are now beginning to see the emergence of a free Iraq, based upon a modern Constitution, is part of my vision for achieving peace that we all want.

Mr. Bourar. Thank you, sir. Thank you very much.

The President. Yes, sir.

Mr. Bourar. Thank you.

The President. Happy New Year.

Mr. Bourar. Happy New Year to you.

The President. Thank you.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 4:22 p.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Ehud Olmert of Israel; King Abdallah bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud and Minister of Foreign Affairs Saud al-Faysal bin Abd al-Aziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia; President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; and Gen. Michel Sleiman, commander, Lebanese Armed Forces. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 6.

Interview With Nadia Bilbassy Charters of Al Arabiya Television

January 4, 2008

Middle East Peace Process

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Mr. President, thank you very much for your time, as always, and thank you for the interview.

The President. Thank you.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. The major obstacle to peace is the settlement activities. Would you request from Prime Minister Olmert a freeze on the settlements?

The President. I think the major obstacle to peace is going to be the politics of both Palestinians and Israelis trying to take advantage of the difficult work that these two leaders are going to have to do to define a state; that's what I think. I think that extremists, in some instances, will try to stop the peace. I believe there is a lot of forces at play in Israel that will try to stop these two men from defining what a state will look like. And my job is to help them stay on the big picture and have the confidence necessary to make tough decisions.

No question, the settlement activity is a problem. But there's a mechanism to deal with that, and that is the roadmap commission, for the best word—is the trilateral commission, which we head, to deal with these roadmap issues. Now, we can solve those—we can work through those problems, but the key is to define a state. Now is the time.

And I believe it's going to get done before my Presidency is over. And the reason I believe it is because these two men, with whom I've spent a fair amount of time, are committed. The state will come into being subject to a roadmap. But the first step is to define what is possible, here's what a state will look like. And that is very important for both the Palestinians and the Israelis.

Middle East Peace Process/President's Upcoming Visit to the Middle East

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Well, in this case, what is exactly your strategy to implement your vision of a Palestinian state by 2008?

The President. Well, the key is for me to convince the two leaders to work through the hard issues. I'll help them, but in order for there to be lasting peace, they've got to

come to the table; they have got to negotiate it. And what ends up happening in this process is that the leaders will commit, and then they'll get their committees to work, and it gets stuck. And that's when I'll have to work with Condi Rice to unstick it, just to keep it moving.

One thing is, is that they know that they've got a good partner in peace in me. They also know that I'm not going to be in office a year from now, so there's a certain urgency to get this state defined. And my trip is going to be to just kind of keep momentum. The Annapolis conference was a successful conference for two reasons: One, it was a chance for the Palestinians and the Israelis to know that the United States is serious about helping them, and equally importantly, it gave the world a chance to come to the table. The rest of the Middle East was there. And that's an important movement. It's going to be important for both Israel and the Palestinians to know that an agreement they reach will be supported by the Middle East.

And so part of my—one of the goals of my trip is to remind our friends and allies in the Middle East that they have got to be supportive of the Middle East peace process as well. They're going to want to know whether or not I'm going to push. And I'm going to want to know—and I'm going to tell them, yes, I am, but we expect you to be constructive players too.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Exactly, but, I mean, can you elaborate a little bit about this? I mean, what more can you do? I mean, support is enough? I mean, one visit is enough? Will you be involved—

The President. But, you see, to get it to this place—I mean, a visit is important, but I'm on the phone a lot, and Condi is on the phone a lot. There's a little—look, visits are important, obviously. And there's a reason why the timing of this visit is what it is. I mean, there was an intifada when I first came into office. Secondly, there is a philosophical change about a two-state solution. I mean, I supported it as the first American President ever to support it. The Israelis, under Ariel Sharon, came to the conclusion that this is in their interests.

We're pushing a lot, let me put it to you that way. I repeat to you, though, that the

notion that somehow America can impose its will on two parties, I don't think it works. I think the America can facilitate. And so you just got to—I hope that as a result of this interview and my trip, the people come away with the notion that George Bush understands now is the time to move.

Freedom Agenda

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. I mean, people know that you are close friend of Israel. What do you want to do to win hearts and minds of the Palestinians, to assure them that the United States is a fair broker in the peace process?

The President. You know, I've heard that. I've heard that, "Well, George Bush is so pro-Israeli he doesn't—he can't possibly care about the plight of the Palestinian person." I would hope that my record, one of liberation and—liberation, by the way, not only from dictatorship but from disease around the world, like HIV/AIDS or malaria—is one that will say to people, he cares about the human condition; that he cares about each individual; that my religion teaches me to love your neighbor.

I have spoken clearly about my belief that—I believe—I pray to the same God as a Muslim prays—that the freedom agenda is really aimed at liberating people, and that the hope is, is that there will be an active, real Palestinian state so people can realize their dreams. But they're going to have to be—they're going to have to do some work. They're going to have to have security forces that protect the average person. They're going to have to have institutions that bring confidence for the Palestinians. They have to have the ability to attract investment. The Palestinians are great entrepreneurs, and if just given a chance, I'm confident the business community will flourish. And most importantly, though, they're going to have to reject the extremists who murder innocent people. And by the way, we're engaged in a great ideological struggle.

Middle East Peace Process

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Absolutely. I mean, in retrospect, would you regret not being involved earlier in the peace process, 7 years ago?

The President. I think that you would find that I have been very much involved in the peace process when you look at the facts. I mean, attitudinal changes don't happen overnight. And the reason we've been able to have this successful conference in Annapolis is because people's attitudes lined up in—kind of in the same direction. There was common interests; common ground has been now recognized. The two-state solution wasn't accepted for the first—

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. So this is the right time, you say?

The President. —for the couple of years of my administration. It took awhile to convince people that the two-state solution was in the security interests of both parties. And plus, there was a couple of difficult—there was a difficult situation, the truth be known. One was the intifada, which made it awfully hard to discuss peace at that time. The other was the Iraq invasion. It just—it created the conditions that made it more difficult to get people's minds in the right place to begin the process. And so now I think we've got the stars lined up, and I think we got a shot, and I'm going for it.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Great. I know he's telling me—

The President. You're fine. Go ahead.

Iran/U.S. Foreign Policy

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Thank you, sir. Part of the visit, as well, is Iran and the Gulf States. What exactly do you want from the Gulf States regarding Iran? And would you ask for their cooperation in case of a military strike?

The President. First of all, I will assure the Gulf States that I believe we can solve this problem diplomatically. Secondly, I will—they're going to want more from me than I'm going to want from them. They're going to want to know what this NIE was all about.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Exactly.

The President. And I'm going to remind them that at my press conference when I explained the NIE, I clearly said, Iran was, is, and will be a danger if they're allowed to enrich, because they can take the knowledge on how to enrich and convert it to a covert

program. If they've had one—a program once, they can easily start a program.

And so I view the Iranian regime as a danger. I also believe that the Iranian people are not bad—they're good people—and that they can have a better way forward. We'll tell our—I'm sure the—our friends and allies will say, "Well, what are you going to do about it? It's one thing to define the problem; do you have a strategy? And if you say you can solve it diplomatically, what is your strategy?" And I'll explain the strategy of economic isolation, that—you know, it's sad; we really don't need to have to be in this position. If the Iranian Government would suspend their enrichment programs, like the international community has demanded, there's a better way forward for them.

But they say that they need this program. And my answer is, is that if you need it, then why haven't you been transparent and disclosed it and honest about it? And what were you doing with a military—secret military program in the first place?

And so I view Iran as a danger; I truly do. And I don't view the people as a danger; I view the Government as a danger.

Iran/President's Upcoming Visit to the Middle East

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Of course. But will it be harder for you to try to convince the Gulf States what—the American position after the intelligence report?

The President. The fact that I'm having to explain it means it's harder after the report. But I believe I'll be able to convince them. What they want to know is whether or not I think they're a danger. They know Iran can be a danger. They want to know whether I think it's a danger and are we committed to helping people achieve security. And part of the trip is to tell people, yes, we've got—we are engaged to help you, if you want our help to enhance security.

Now, look, nobody wants to be dictated to, and I'm certainly not going to do that. I am there to reassure and to look people in the eye and say, I believe Iran is a threat; we have a strategy to deal with it; and we want to work with you.

U.S. Foreign Policy

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Did you ever discuss a military option with the Gulf States?

The President. Will I ever do that?

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Did you, or will you?

The President. No, I haven't, because I believe we can solve this diplomatically. On the other hand, as you've heard me say many times since you've covered the White House, that all options must be on the table in order to make sure diplomacy is effective.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Absolutely. Secretary Gates told Al Arabiya in an interview recently that the diplomatic option is still 100 percent in focus. Does that mean that you're going to still pressure Iran on the diplomatic front? And how far can you go before your patience will run out?

The President. Yes. Definitely, we'll continue to pressure them on the diplomatic front. And it's hard, because sometimes people are more interested in market share for their goods than they are for achieving peace. And so I've spent a lot of time with allies in Europe, for example, convincing them of the importance of working together to send a common message to the Iranian regime. So, yes, the diplomatic option is on the table, and it's active, and we're working hard.

Syria/Lebanon's Presidential Election

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. On the Syria issue—I don't know if I'm allowed to ask one—

The President. Keep going.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. I'm sorry.

The President. All you got to do is ask; I'll handle it. [Laughter]

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Thank you, sir. Thank you. On the Syria issue, I mean, we already talked about—you actually told me that you—patience with Asad is running out. But we still have no Lebanese election. What does it mean? What can you do? Is it negotiation? Is it a military strike? Is it sanction against Syria? What can you do?

The President. Well, what we can do is make sure that the world understands our position and try to convince them that we ought to work together to say to the Syrians, let Sleiman go forward. That's the President that the people want there in Beirut, and he

ought to go forward. And that's going to be on my agenda when I talk to friends and allies in the Middle East, that—and we can collectively send the message to President Asad.

We've sanctioned Syria, and I'm looking at different ways to keep sending a tough message because, so far, he has shown no willingness to be constructive on Lebanon or in dealing with a militant Hamas or in stopping suiciders from heading into Iraq, in other words, some reasonable things that we would like to see done in order to improve relations which he has not done.

We're working very carefully—closely with the French, for example. I've had a conversation with President Sarkozy on the subject. I'll be talking to my friend King Abdallah of Saudi Arabia on the subject, who has got a very keen interest in seeing to it that the Lebanese democracy goes forward. And so we've got a very good chance to have a more focused, concerted, universal message that President Asad, I hope, will listen to.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. But some will say they might wait for another year until you leave office, and then—

The President. Well, he could try that. But in the meantime, there will be others around who he will have irritated as a result of his stubbornness. And so, yes, I mean, he could try to wait me out, but there's other leaders in the world that are as equally concerned as I am about Syria not letting the Presidency go forward and really hurting this very important democracy in the Middle East.

Lebanon's survival as a democracy is, in my judgment, very important for the world. And Syria is—has been—when we passed the resolution out of the United Nations, it worked. President Chirac and I worked together, got our foreign ministries working together, and it worked. And yet as opposed to honoring the notion of staying out of the—and to stop obstructing politics, Syria has just not been helpful at all.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. So will you impose sanction on Syria?

The President. We have already, and we're looking at different options, of course.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. A tougher sanction.

The President. Well, we're always looking for ways to make sure that we're effective. It's—sanctions, individual sanctions are okay. They're much more effective when they're—other people join along.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Absolutely. To show that you actually supporting Prime Minister Siniora, why not visiting Lebanon on this trip?

The President. Good question. You have to just—I've got only so much time. There's other countries I won't be going to either. We've had plenty of high-ranking officials go to support Prime Minister Siniora. I think about Condi, and I think about Admiral Fallon, who I sent over there to help analyze what the Lebanese forces need.

Listen, I was very impressed when Prime Minister Siniora made the decision to move Lebanese forces into the extremist stronghold and dealt with them. That's what you're supposed to do. And in order to have a safe and secure society, the state has got to show that it can provide security for the people and not tolerate pockets of extreme radicals who are murderous in their intentions, and he did. And right after that, I sent Admiral Fallon in to say, look, we need to help strengthen this man. He showed courage and leadership, and he needs to have a military that is able to function at the behest of a state to provide security. And so we're in the process of inventorying and analyzing and seeing how we can help from that perspective.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. But do you hope the election will go forward in Lebanon?

The President. Soon. I was hoping it would go forward last week. They keep delaying it, and I'm convinced a lot of it has to do with the fact that Syria is not helpful. And therefore, part of our strategy is to get others to send the same message that I've consistently been sending to President Asad: If you want to be isolated, if you want to be—or if you want—you have a choice: Do you want to be isolated or a part of the world? You can make the choice. You can hang out with a limited number of friends, like Iran, or you can have better relations in the neighborhood and in the world. It's your choice to make.

Step one is to get out of the way of these Presidential elections. They've got a good

candidate. A lot of people agree that this is the person, and now Syria needs to get out of the way.

Progress in Iraq

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Sir, on the Iraq issue, the security has improved. Does that mean you're going to withdraw troops by the end of the year?

The President. Our troops decisions will be made based upon the considered recommendations of our commanders. And success in Iraq is essential, and therefore, I'll make the decisions along with those recommendations based upon success. The surge has been successful. The economy is getting better, and the politics is getting better. There is still a lot of work to be done, however, and I am—you know what thrills me the most is that the average Iraqi's life is becoming more hopeful.

Here's what I tell people. I tell people here in America that an Iraqi mother wants the same thing for her children that an American mother wants, a chance for that child to grow up in peace and to realize dreams, a chance for the child to go outside and play and not fear harm. And it's beginning to happen. The average—you know, it's still tough. There's still too many suiciders, but the level of violence is declining. I didn't see this, but I was told that the celebrations at New Year's Eve in Baghdad were festive. And life is coming back, and it's—that's exciting to me.

War on Terror in Iraq

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. And just to follow up on that, the generals were saying that Iran and Syria actually has been playing a role in stopping the suiciders of coming to Iraq. Would you credit them for that at least?

The President. I'm not willing to credit the Iranians yet. I don't have enough evidence. One general said that, then he corrected his story. I think so long as we're finding sophisticated IEDs—that could only have been manufactured in Iran—that are killing innocent people inside Iraq, that's cause for concern. I'm willing to have dialogs with the Iranians about Iraq in Iraq, but our message will be, if we catch you providing arms and trained—training people, then we'll—we're

going to hold them to account. You just got to understand that.

I would give—if, in fact, Syria is trying to stop suiciders, I will give them credit, of course. I hope that's the case. It's certainly one way to begin to earning better relations with the United States, is to stop the exportation of suiciders who go kill innocent people.

I'm looking forward to the trip. I'm glad you're going.

President's Legacy

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Me too. Finally, how do you want the people in the Middle East to remember you, sir?

The President. History is odd. I will be long gone before the true history of the Bush administration is written. I'm still reading analyses of Abraham Lincoln's Presidency. I would hope, at least, at the very minimum, people would say that George W. Bush respected my religion and has great concern for the human condition; that he hurts when he sees poverty and hopelessness; that he's a realistic guy, because he understands that the only way that these extremists who murder the innocent can recruit is when you find—when they find hopeless situations—they have no vision that's positive; and that he helped present an alternative, and that was one based upon liberty and the rights of men and women in a just and free society. That's how I hope you remember me.

Ms. Bilbassy Charters. Thank you very much, sir, for your time and for your generosity. Thank you very much.

NOTE: The interview was taped at 4:37 p.m. in the Map Room at the White House for later broadcast. In his remarks, the President referred to President Mahmoud Abbas (Abu Mazen) of the Palestinian Authority; Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and former Prime Minister Ariel Sharon of Israel; Gen. Michel Sleiman, commander, Lebanese Armed Forces; President Bashar al-Asad of Syria; President Nicolas Sarkozy and former President Jacques Chirac of France; Prime Minister Fuad Siniora of Lebanon; Adm. William J. Fallon, USN, commander, U.S. Central Command; and Gen. David H. Petraeus, USA, commanding general, Multi-National Force—Iraq. The transcript was released by the Office of the Press Secretary on January 6.

Remarks at Horace Greeley Elementary School in Chicago, Illinois

January 7, 2008

The President. Thank you all. Please be seated. Thank you very much for coming. I am so honored to be at Horace Greeley. People say, "Why would you want to come to Horace Greeley?" Because it's a center of excellence. It's a place for this country to realize what is possible when you have a good principal that's supported by the community, when you've got teachers who work hard and students willing to learn.

Coming with me today is the Secretary of Education, Margaret Spellings. Madam Secretary, I'm honored you're here. She's—she and I share the same philosophy. It starts with our refusal to accept school systems that do not teach every child how to read and write and add and subtract and our firm belief that local folks can figure out the best way to chart a path to excellence.

I'm proud that Congressman Rahm Emanuel is here. Mr. Congressman, thank you. As you know, we're from different political parties. [Laughter] But we share a common concern, and that is doing what's right for America. Both of us understand that educational excellence is not a partisan issue; it is an issue that is important for the future of this country. So, Congressman, I'm proud you're here.

I'm also proud to be here with His Honor, Mayor Daley. I've come to know the mayor over 7 years of being your President. The first thing I learned about him: It's better to have him for you than against you when you run for office. [Laughter] He loves his city, and he's, in my judgment, one of our Nation's best mayors. He also has taken advantage of a reform that gave mayors the capability of setting the tone and the pace for education in our big cities. Some of the best reforms in America have taken place when the mayor has taken the lead, and, Mr. Mayor, you have certainly taken the lead.

And I'm proud of your passion. I can remember visiting with you earlier on—about education, before No Child Left Behind came into being. And the mayor had this strong sense and strong feeling that this country needed to do something differently